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## Learning democracy in a new society: German orientation courses for migrants through the lens of Buber's dialogical education

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### Abstract

*Migrants, coming to Germany, must attend integration courses in order to obtain a residence permit. These courses are comprised of a language section as well as an orientation section. The latter's purpose is, according to the German Federal Agency for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), the transmission of knowledge of the German legal system, culture, and history and especially of democratic values of the German political system (BAMF, 2017, p. 6). This article examines the challenges that instructors and participants of those courses face when it comes to the teaching and learning of democratic values, based on a qualitative research conducted in 2018. As the theoretical lens, this article incorporates the concept of dialogue by Martin Buber.*

**Keywords:** Buber; civic education; dialogue; integration courses; migration

### Introduction

Teaching and educational programs can often be seen as oriented towards a specific goal. On the other hand, learning processes in adulthood are circular and take place in the form of dialogue and exchange. It is a common maxim in adult education that we learn from and with each other based on our own experiences and interpretations. Learning in the framework of integration courses for migrants (in Germany, as it might be in any other country) is per definition goal-oriented: it aims to help migrants to find (new) orientation and integrate migrants into a new society (and community). How do the participants experience the learning process within these courses and to what extent can (and should) the principles of a dialogical education be implemented in the learning process? The paper will examine these and other questions related to learning in the German orientation courses of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF).

Our basic assumption is that education within the orientation courses is (or should be) designed based on central principles of adult education such as participant orientation, reference to life and experience, self-determination, and humanistic values. As the theoretical framework for the paper, we use Martin Buber's concept of a true encounter and dialogical education, where the dialogical principle - the I-Thou relationship – is placed at the centre of pedagogical activity.

Based on Buber's thoughts, this article examines the degree to which education is designed and experienced in the orientation courses as an “opening up for” democratic values (Buber: *Erschließung*) - as opposed to imposing democratic values (Buber: *Auferlegung*). The focus here is on different dimensions of dialogic interaction: authenticity, recognition of otherness, recognition of autonomy and the drive/need to create (*Urhebertrieb*).

The orientation courses as designed by the German BAMF curriculum have not yet been systematically addressed in the research on adult education. The focus of the literature is mostly on the structures of the integration and orientation courses, as well as on the guidelines set by the BAMF. The perspectives of the participants and instructors were included in the research with a focus on language acquisition, as can be read in Hentges (2013) and Heinemann (2018). In his article, Käßlinger (2016) argues that adult education research has so far failed to critically examine the teaching and learning processes in these courses. This will be addressed in the context of this paper.

### **Buber's concept of dialogical education<sup>1</sup>**

Martin Buber (1878-1965) is considered one of the greatest Jewish philosophers, thinkers, and educators who dedicated his life to facilitating encounter, dialogue, and learning for people in situations of transition and crisis. In Germany, he and Franz Rosenzweig established in 1920 the *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus* (Free Jewish Academy), the most famous and important educational institution that, even after the Nuremberg Laws (1935), provided education for Jews who were excluded from all spheres of social life and from all educational institutions in Germany. Later he became director of the Office for Jewish Adult Education in Germany. After his migration to Palestine in 1938, Buber became professor of social philosophy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and, after the establishment of the State of Israel, he was commissioned to launch the Institute for Adult Education with the purpose to train teachers to work with immigrants (Guilherme & Morgan, 2017, p. 6-9). In the newly founded state of Israel, the question of integrating immigrants from a wide range of origins into a whole was no less acute than in today's migration society. The topic of migration was thus crucial for Buber's life, and also for his writing. Buber was concerned practically (as founder and head of the Institute for Adult Education) and theoretically with the integration of people from different countries into a new (Israeli) society. Buber saw a particular role for adult education in the process of integration. In this role, adult education was considered, not as a continuation of vocational training, but rather as “education of character”, as a way of promoting a certain “type of person”, which is required by a specific historical situation. He considered this task difficult, but also crucial for the development of a democratic Israeli state:

It is hardly necessary to emphasize how great are the problems and difficulties which confront the teacher in Israel who must educate thousands of adult immigrants so that they may become mature enough to participate fully in the life of a democratic state (Buber, 2005a/[1952], p. 360).

His approach to training teachers for immigrants was not limited to the dissemination or appropriation of a certain knowledge. Rather, Buber devised an education that encompassed the person as a whole and was aimed at a respectful living together in a heterogeneous society: 'Its result should do much to foster mutual respect and understanding among the citizens of the country' (ibid., p. 364).

Buber focused on promoting the dialogical skills of the teachers and the learners. He emphasized the need of responding to people individually, of openness to learners' experiences and opinions, and of personal contact:

What is sought is a truly reciprocal conversation in which both sides are full partners. The teacher leads and directs this conversation, and enters it without any restraint. The teacher should ask genuine questions to which he does not know the full answer himself, and the student in turn should give the teacher information concerning his experiences and opinions. Conversely, when the teacher is asked a question by the student, his reply should proceed from the depths of his own personal experience (Buber, 1950, p. 117 f.).

Buber describes some forms of education as an "evil of modern human being" (Buber, 2005c/[1922], p. 128), when a person is seen as an object, as a means to an end. A human being is thus perceived and used with regard to his/her special abilities and aptitudes, "as a bundle of tangible, influenceable, manageable, exploitable properties" (ibid.). Buber contrasts this logic with a dialogical education that explicitly treats people as subjects.

For Buber, a true dialogue between individuals is a rare phenomenon. He developed a taxonomy to exemplify two kinds of relationships in which people enter: I-Thou and I-It. The I-Thou-relationship describes the core of the dialogical attitude, which Buber describes as the willingness to be addressed and answered by the Other. Through this type of encounter, people are perceived and addressed as individuals, then it is upon the human being to answer, which includes being attentive towards the dialogue partner, taking responsibility for the moment, for "living life", and for the presence of the inter-human relationship. In such a moment, "a newly created world concretion has been put in our arms; we are responsible for it" (Buber, 1979c/[1930], p. 163).

In contrast to the singularity and mutuality of the I-Thou-relation, the I-It-relation is the expression of how we experience the world in its structure and regularity and how we use this experience to understand the order of the world. The I-It experience is always indirect and mediated, perceived as an element of a structure and is classifiable, understandable only in connection with a purpose and does not have a meaning in itself. The Thou, in contrast, is not classified in space, time and causation. Buber recognizes the necessity of the I-It-relationship in order to have an orientation in the world, but warns against the "increase of the It-world" – i.e. the expansion of the objective world and the logic of structure and usefulness at the cost of a "decrease of the relational strength of the human being" (Buber, 1979b/[1923], p. 41). Only through turning to the other while respecting the dialogical principle, we can create "a joint fertility that cannot be found anywhere else" – because only through "the inter-human relationship something can be opened up that would be otherwise undeveloped" (Buber, 1979a/[1954], p. 295). Guilherme & Morgan point out, however, that Buber rejects any sort of sharp dualism between the I-Thou and I-It relation: "there is always an interplay between the I-Thou and the I-It, rather than an either/or relation between these foundational concepts" (Guilherme & Morgan, 2009, p. 567). Any relationship can therefore be transformed in the educational process into its opposite.

Buber defines three conditions or “elements” in the behaviour of people facing each other in the conditions of dialogue and true inter-human-relationships (Buber, 1979c/[1930], p. 287):

- (1) "uprightness" / authenticity ("not appearance, but being"),
- (2) awareness of the other and his/her otherness,
- (3) being cautious not to impose oneself onto the other.

The first basic characteristic (1) implies that the individual truly communicates with the other, allows the other to participate in his/her being in the world, and opens him-/herself up to the other. The second (2) includes a special form of perception of the other person: in his/her entirety, unity and uniqueness. The other person must not be perceived as being analysable ("dissectable"), reductive (disregarding the diversity of the person) or derivative (summarizing "the becoming of a person" from a genetic formula). Otherwise, this would lead to a "radical de-secreteness" between people, whereby "the personality, the relentlessly close mystery, once the motivation of the quietest enthusiasm [...] will be levelled" (Buber, 1979a/[1954], p. 285). One of Buber's attitudes is called "personal awareness", which is described as "real fantasy" - a creative imagination that focuses on the concrete person in the encounter. Real fantasy is more than just watching and perceiving the person, it is "a swinging into the other, which demands the most intense stimulation of my being, just as it is the kind of all real fantasy, only that here the area of my deed is not all kind, but that I am confronted with a special concrete real person [...]"(ibid., p. 286).

Buber warns (3) for the imposition - an intrusive appearance, an inappropriate effect on an individual's attitude and lifestyle. He juxtaposes this phenomenon to a natural development, an opening up (*Erschließung*), which he describes as an influence that is not characterized by instruction, but by encounter, "by existential communication" (ibid., p. 287). In the process of imposition, the counterpart is not seen as a person in his/her uniqueness. The person who has been imposed with attitudes and opinions is seen through the lens of his/her usefulness for a certain purpose (ibid., p. 288).

Friedman, one of the best-known researchers on Buber, provides a distinction between imposition (*Auferlegung*) and development (*Erschließung*), between propaganda and a legitimate influence as conceptualized by Buber:

Genuine conversation, like every genuine fulfilment of relation between men, means acceptance of otherness. This means that although one may desire to influence the other and to lead him to share in one's relation to truth, one accepts and confirms him in his being this particular man made in this particular way. One wishes him to have a different relation to one's own truth in accordance with his individuality. Influencing the other does not mean injecting one's own 'rightness' into him, but using one's influence to let that which is recognized as right, just, and true take seed and grow in the substance of the other in the form suited to his individuation (Friedman, 1956, p. 102).

According to Buber, the essential element of a real dialogue is seeing, recognizing that the other is different. In order to meet the "other", you have to deal with him/her as someone who is different from yourself, but at the same time as someone with whom you can relate. Buber sees a dialogue as a process of pursuing human nature and human development. In this process a human being needs a constant orientation (and re-orientation) through learning – in terms of positioning his-/herself to others and to the world with regard to certain norms and values (Friedenthal-Haase, 1991, p. 32).

Buber lays an emphasis on the role of the teacher in the education process: Education cannot develop where the teacher is moved by *Eros* (for Buber: selection based on affection or inclination) or the will to power (Buber, M. (2005e/[1926], p. 145-6). The teacher who is moved by the will to power is a simple transmitter of the “secured, hereditary values”; his educational approach is rigid and non-dialogical (Kloubert, 2020). *Eros* and will to power give the teacher the feeling of supposed omnipotence, reducing the learner to an object.

The dialogical educator, on the contrary, directs his/her actions towards an “updating of the forces” of the individual: he believes “that the right and the true is laid in every person in a unique and uniquely individual manner; no other way can be imposed over a human being” (Buber, 1979a/[1954], p. 289). Guilherme & Morgan (2018) describe a teacher as a builder of community “who prepares the ideological framework, while the members of the group receive the idea that binds them as a community” and who helps the learners to “enter into the dynamics of I-Thou relations with each other” (p. 787). This practice is “fundamental for understanding the importance, the ethical weight, of being a moral being” (ibid.). Adult education in this sense is aimed at “fulfilling a life task in her community in the given historical situation” (Buber, 2005d/[1949/1950], p. 240). It is based on:

Dialogue of questions and answers, mutual questions and mutual answers, dialogue in the mutual consideration of a reality, nature or art, or joint exploration of a life problem, dialogue of real togetherness, where the pauses of the conversation can be no less dialogical than the speech (ibid., p. 241).

This attitude has implications for education, which, according to Buber, must not allow itself to lapse into relativism, but must progress through dialogue with the other - “an attempt that must be made over and over again” (Jacobi, 2017, p. 666).

A human being cannot fully grasp the world, but he/she can do his/her best to seek truth in a dialogue: “We are not allowed to possess the truth; but whoever believes in it and serves it builds on its empire” (Buber, 2005b/[1935], p. 282). This “service to the truth” can only succeed if people live in “constant self-reflection and willingness to repent, to revise views and judgments, which counteracts the widespread tendency to see other people only as members of an ideological 'camp' and to reduce them to the ideological [factor]” (Meilhammer, 2005, p. 172). In this sense, education is a process of individual maturity by overcoming the “fictitious mind” (in the sense of false, non-real attitude: *Fiktivgesinnung*) and by resisting collective ideologies.

### Concept of the orientation courses

Against this backdrop, the concept of the nationwide orientation course is described in order to explicate the goals and implications inherent to it, compare them with the results of the study, and interpret them according to the principles of Buber's humanism and dialogue.

In 2004 the Federal Agency for Flight and Migration (BAMF) presented a concept for a nationwide integration course (cf. Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge [BAMF], 2004); a curriculum was published three years later (BAMF, 2007), and in 2017 it was readjusted (BAMF, 2017). These documents follow essentially the same principles and visions and differ only in that the revised version is much more detailed and the scope of the lessons has been increased from 30 to 45, then to 60 and finally to 100 hours. The curriculum specifies topics, goals and learning content, as well as the

number of teaching units per topic or module. The importance and relevance of the orientation courses for the integration process is explained as follows:

Knowledge of fundamental values of society as well as knowledge of the legal system, history and culture as well as the political institutions in Germany make it easier to find your way in the new society and create opportunities for identification. (Integrationskonzept, cit. in: BAMF, 2017, p. 7)

The stated goals are:

- Awakening understanding of the German state system,
- Developing a positive assessment of the German state,
- Imparting knowledge of the rights and obligations of residents and citizens,
- Developing the ability to orientate yourself further (methodological competence),
- Empowering to participate in social life (competence to act),
- Acquiring intercultural competence (ibid.).
- The content of the orientation course consists of three modules:
- The module “Politics in Democracy” (35 hours) deals with the principles and fundamental rights of the constitution as well as with the constitutional organs and political parties.
- The module “History and Responsibility” (20 hours) deals with the German past (dictatorship of National Socialism and the GDR) in order to develop an understanding of the “German and European present” and “responsibility and appreciation for democratic principles and fundamental rights in the Present from knowledge of the consequences of the Nazi dictatorship” (BAMF, 2017, p. 32).
- The module “Person and Society” (38 hours) aims at religious and cultural tolerance, the acceptance of different opinions as well as gender equality.

The remaining seven hours are divided into an introduction of three hours and a four-hour final unit, which serves to prepare for the (standardized) test. The pool for the orientation test consists of a catalogue of 300 multiple choice questions, of which 33 are asked in the test.

The curriculum for the orientation course is determined by the integration course regulation. The courses themselves are carried out by various public and private adult and youth education institutions on behalf of and in accordance with the guidelines of the BAMF. These are, for example, adult education centres, supra-regional private providers, such as the German Employee Academy (DAA) and Kolping Academies. The institutions that organize the courses are regularly monitored by the BAMF to ensure that the content, organizational principles, and educational design have been followed.

## Methods and data collection

This qualitative study consisted of semi-structured interviews with former participants of orientation courses and of a written questionnaire administered to course instructors.

There were twelve interview participants (7 male and 5 female, from 22 to 48 years). The interviews took place in August 2018 in an established adult education facility in Middle Franconia, a region in Bavaria. The interviews were based on a guideline that structured the interview but allowed for flexibility to adapt to the respective interview situation. It ensured that participants gave answers to the same

questions. The guideline prompted participants' perceptions of the following thematic areas: expectations of the course, what they learned, disappointments about what they hoped for but did not learn, German democracy, the role of the teachers, consideration given toward their own experiences during the learning process, their role as learners, and the teacher-student relationship. If requested, a translator was available during the interviews, so that the participants had the opportunity to give their answers in their native tongue. Participants were guaranteed that all of their answers would remain anonymous. It was also assured that the research aimed to assess neither the performance of the participants during the course nor the educational institution.

In addition to the interviews with the participants, an anonymized, written, qualitative questionnaire was completed by ten course instructors from the same educational institution in June and July 2018. The course instructors were asked to answer the questions independently, i.e. without consulting their colleagues and without tools such as the curriculum of the orientation course. In terms of the content, the questionnaire explored the motivations and interests of orientation course participants from the course instructors' views. Furthermore, the course instructors were asked to self-assess their role as teachers and to reflect on the teaching process. Their evaluation of the importance of the orientation course for the living environment of the participants was also asked.

Analysis of the data collected from the interviews and the written questionnaires was based on the following questions: (1) How did the participants describe the learning process and the role of the instructor? What roles did the instructors attribute to themselves? How authentically do they believe that they behave towards the participants? (2) How did the participants feel about their respective individual living environments and life experience in a new society? How should / could those be approached from the instructor's perspective? (3) How and to what extent did the course participants feel supported in their ability to autonomously think and act in the new democratic society? To what extent was the intention of the instructors to promote participation and action skills? The answers are obviously not generalizable, as it is a qualitative study, but they give insight into narratives, structures, and processes of meaning-making in the given educational setting.

These questions relate to the nature of educational processes: Is civic/political education, as part of which the orientation course considered to be (see BAMF 2017, p. 9), designed and conducted in accordance with its core principles of dialogue, autonomy, empowerment and critical (self-) reflection? Or, rather, does it resemble an effort to transmit an uncritical acceptance of information? These questions are approached at the micro level through analysing the educational relationships between instructors and participants, as well as the learning content and formats from the subjective perspective of the respondents. Specifically, it is about how learning processes were viewed and described - as an orientation in the sense of empowerment and the promotion of self-discovery or rather as an orientation in the sense of one-sided control, regulation and imposing from the outside.

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and content analysis (Mayring, 2000) was used to code and categorise the data from the interviews and from the written questionnaires into themes. We used Maxqda, a software program for computer-aided qualitative data analysis, to enhance consistency and transparency. The initial codes were derived from the theoretical framework as described above (inductive codes). In the process of analysis, new themes emerged; they were generalized to a code and described using relevant examples from the text (deductive codes). We compared our



initial codes with emergent codes in order to cluster the connected categories together and construct a list of themes and sub-themes.

## Findings

Three primary themes of the teaching-learning process are presented below: (1) the role of the instructors in facilitating an encounter; (2) recognition of the other; and (3) promoting autonomy and the ability to judge and act. These three dimensions can be indirectly assigned to the three above-mentioned requirements for dialogical education according to Martin Buber: the demand of being authentic and present in the moment (“uprightness”), of being open to the dialogue partner, of recognizing and appreciating the otherness of the other without judgement (“acknowledging the other”); striving to not impose oneself over the other, but to support and foster the uniqueness of the other in terms of her own power (“avoiding imposition”).

### *“Uprightness” / authenticity and possibility of an encounter*

The question of authenticity and “uprightness” is related to teachers as well as to learners. It can be assumed that the teachers have a responsibility to launch an encounter and a dialogue, so we start with findings on the perceived roles of the teacher in the classroom.

The questionnaire completed by the instructors showed consistently that they aspire not only to impart knowledge to course participants so that they can reproduce it on the multiple-choice-test, but also to have deep conversations about societal values and principles of living together in a society. Some instructors emphasize the need to talk about such fundamental values as freedom of expression and to experience these values with learners during the course, and thus allow the values to be exemplified and examined together. One of the instructors explains: “Often I referred to the basic value of freedom of expression and I try to explore together, how one can endure the co-existence of different opinions” (Questionnaire 8, p. 3).<sup>2</sup> Values are perceived here, not as a subject to transmit, but as phenomena that can and should be experienced together. This line of reasoning is also visible in the following quotation: “Democracy should not be an abstract value, but should be lived [in the classroom]” (Questionnaire 3, p. 2).

Some instructors, however, point out that their aim is to follow the curriculum exactly in terms of the content to be taught; their focus is therefore on preparing their learners to pass the exam at the end of the course. The interaction in these cases is reduced to the minimum; students’ mental efforts are concentrated on memorizing. Memorizing of the content can, however, hardly be equated with the development of one’s own worldview and authenticity. In this case, Buber’s category of fictionalism (as opposed to the real and genuine attitude) could be useful to understand the potential danger of this kind of teaching and learning. We can illustrate it using a description by Adam, a course participant:

The teacher, for example, she also gave us topics of the orientation course on paper, and she said is not a specialist about the laws or about the rules [...] and she also didn’t understand these laws and rules well, so she only reads what is on paper without more details (Interview Adam, #00:12:44#).

However, we can also find the contrasting statements showing how instructors develop deep discussions about democratic values: “They [the teachers] explain the different

opinions and why is so and so or if there is something that is not obvious, logical for us they explain it” (Interview Nadiya, #00:20:51#).

The reason for the didactical choices of the instructors can be guided by personal preferences, but also by the general framework of the courses. A response from one of the instructors illustrates that the circumstances and conditions prescribed by the course design by BAMF are pivotal and often do not allow for a more dialogic educational design. A course instructor describes the teaching process as follows:

Actually, we always impose our point of view on the participants. We, the instructors, do not have the time to explain the meaningfulness of what we teach. Ergo you learn everything by heart to pass the exam. Very few learn why the content is important. That's not how good integration works (Questionnaire 3, p. 9).

From the perspective of the students, the discussions were also perceived as a distraction from the main goal (of preparing for the exam). Learning is in such a case goal-oriented, whereas discussion and dialogue are perceived as a “waste of the time”:

There was a lot of discussion: We discussed, maybe criticized each other, but then we either found a solution or left the problem as it was and no longer spoke so that we wouldn't waste even any more time (Interview Fatima, #00:16:28#).

The transmission of information (knowledge about Germany) is considered highly important for integration – not only in the curriculum text of the BAMF, but also by some instructors. Encounter and dialogue remain a pleasant, but not necessary addendum. If, however, in the dense plan of the course provided by BAMF, the possibility of a true authentic encounter arises, this experience is crucial for some learners, as we can see in the example of Fatima. She reports about her experience of feeling seen and recognized by the instructor:

At the end of the course, for example the last day, I have found a very good impression of our teachers. She gave such a letter for each of us about what she learnt to know about each of us and from us. Yes, I did, I really liked that, yes. (Laughs) (Interview Fatima, #00:19:14#).

Another aspect of authenticity/uprightness relates to the possibility and/or necessity of the teachers' neutrality. According to the interviews, the instructors seemed to have a high reputation among the participants, so it is reasonable to assume that what the instructors say can influence the opinion formation of the participants. The instructors in this study seem to be aware of their possible influence. In the questionnaires, they report that they either do not express a direct statement on a controversial question at all (in an effort not to steer the opinion-forming process) or they do it only with an explicit indication that this is a personal opinion on a controversial issue. When the second option is chosen, then it is justified by the wish to develop a capacity for providing reasons for one's own argument.

Yes, if the participants ask, they will get my answer, but with the indication that this is only my personal view. ‘You shouldn't feel influenced in any way.’ However, they should learn how to justify or defend their own views and how to stand by them (Questionnaire 6, p. 4).

An instructor points out that with articulation of her own principles and beliefs she aims to encourage an exchange of opinions in the classroom. She added, however: “[I want]

the participants to reflect upon their own, often very dogmatical beliefs" (Questionnaire 1, page 4).

One instructor recounted a conformist behaviour by students that complicates the use of dialogue: "The participant tries to copy the teacher's opinion in order not to get any difficulties, but often the content cannot be grasped linguistically and intellectually" (Questionnaire 4, page 9). The power imbalance (knowledge / non-knowledge) in the learning situation and the fact that the participants are existentially dependent on passing the exam makes it difficult to achieve a real encounter: "The participants know exactly which answers from they are 'expected'" [...] (Questionnaire 1, page 2).

Based on Buber's dialogical principle, it can certainly be stated that education that is free of expressing one's own authentic position is not possible. On the other hand, the process of searching for truth is a dialogical one where everyone is asked to truly articulate their own position and worldview. This requires, however, appropriate skills of the instructors and appropriate course design from BAMP.

### *Acknowledging the other and respecting pluralism*

Do the participants feel addressed by the instructors in their uniqueness, as Buber demands in his second principle of dialogue? Buber states that educational processes only comply with the principle of freedom if there is a dialogue: the world can be experienced and opened up by a "salutation", by being addressed, and this is the only way to generate an answer (cf. Buber, 2005e/[1926], p. 144). This salutation implies the principle of encompassing the dialogue partner in her wholeness/entirety.

The question then arises whether the participants are recognized in their unique being and whether their potential is acknowledged? It seems obvious that a real encounter can hardly happen when the instructor uses a frontal teaching method. In one interview, the participant mentioned that the lesson was limited to reading aloud the questions and answers from the catalogue of test questions:

She [the teacher] reads the question and each question has an answer, the answer is exactly like that, she didn't ask us about our opinions or anything. Just the question, the answer, the question, the answer (Interview Adam, #00:16:47#).

Looking at the findings, it can be said that most of the courses are based on lecture-style teaching. The attempt at a dialogic interaction was mentioned in very few cases: instructors pointed out that they ask participants to provide some examples of their experience that could be related to a content of the lesson (e.g. a legal regulation in the country or school system). However, the interviews with course participants showed that their experiences and contributions were only seldom queried and sometimes even explicitly prevented due to the short time available to present the content: "Yes, we could say something, but not long, because of the short time, one cannot speak much (laughs) yes, but we were allowed to, yes, to tell a little" (Interview Samira, #00:00:53#). To the question about which roles the life-stories of participants play in the course, one instructor responded: "Homesickness, the lack of family members often leads to weaknesses in concentration, which, however, are usually gone after a few hours / days" (Questionnaire 1, page 5). This answer might imply that the personal experience of the participant had been considered as distractive from the actual content, so it is beneficial when distractive moments are "gone" after a certain period. For another instructor in the study, negative experiences, especially connected to students' flight from their home countries, are an issue to consider. He acknowledges that difficult and even tragic life events tremendously influence the learning process and

describes his strategy to deal with them in terms of giving space to those stories: “The participants must first get settled in Germany, feel good, feel accepted and understood” (Questionnaire 6, page 5).

In most of the interviews, instructors speak about conflicts between the different participants as a challenge. If they come from countries with different or even contradicting beliefs and cultures, an encounter and dialogue between participants can be difficult: “Gender roles and religion are the most explosive topics. The participants perceive the remarks of others as offensive [...] The discussion is very loud” (Questionnaire 1, page 3).

Some instructors try to stifle discussion with the remarks such as: “In Germany, it is this way, and no other” (Questionnaire 9, page 3). Others, however, recognize challenging discussions as an opportunity to speak about value pluralism and freedom of expression. They try to show the variety of perspectives and to encourage controversial discussions (which is required as a didactic principle in the curriculum of BAMF):

I allow discussions. I collect reasons with the participants for why something is like this, I collect arguments for and against. I compare and try to show the participants that there is not always only one fixed solution (Questionnaire 6, p. 3).

The study clearly shows that the task of integration into democracy is hampered by the strict course design requirements (as prescribed by BAMF), the resulting didactic teaching method, and sometimes by the need for instructors to facilitate conflict situations. The pedagogical efforts of the instructors rarely focus on recognizing participants as thinking and acting subjects with their own unique experiences, developmental paths, and interpretative patterns. Buber’s principle of true human encounter calls for the recognition of the uniqueness and individual development. Therefore, striving to mould students into a predetermined type of person is problematic if the inter-human interaction is to be based on I-Thou-Relationships. Accordingly, in the context of migration and orientation courses, integration does not mean assimilation, however perfect the envisioned role models might be. In the book *The Hasidim's Tales*, Buber illustrates that it is more important to be authentic than it is to even emulate a role model. In it, the character Rabbi Sussja explains: “In the world to come, I will not be asked: ‘Why have you not been Moses?’ I will be asked: ‘Why have you not been Sussja?’” (Buber, 2014, p. 337).

### ***Avoiding imposition: Social norms and individual lifestyle***

One purpose of our study was to investigate participants’ perceptions of the connection between course content (aiming to acquaint them with the German state and culture) and their own living environment/lifeworld (either from their own country or their unique individual experience), as well as whether and how the instructors facilitated this connection. Adherence to the rules of the host society was a recurring theme in the interviews; some participants even described the course as an “introduction” to the rules of German society. This aspect of integration is thus equated with the strict pursuit of the norms and principles learned in the course. Accordingly, in some interviews the idea was expressed that failure to observe certain established rules and norms would imply exclusion from the new community. “We have to keep them, and if I keep these rules and these laws, that means I am now a part of this society” (Interview Adam, #00:25:53#).

It becomes clear from the interviews that disagreement as a legitimate act in society and the discursive nature of social norms are not reflected in the course. In an interview with Adam, he replies to the question of whether there was any content about which he had a different opinion than the instructor: "No, the laws in Germany are what I think - how they should be. I have no right to question the law" (Interview Adam, #00:08:51#).

From the interviews with the course participants, it can be concluded that the instructors did not, or at least not sufficiently, encourage disagreement in the classroom. Some of the course instructors felt that they were not competent enough to speak about legal regulations and limited themselves to distributing information for participants to memorize, as Adam described in response to the question about course discussions and his ability to contribute an opinion (Interview Adam, #00:16:47#). Consequently, rules were memorized as verses, without making them comprehensible through discussion: "There was not much discussion or anything in this course, very little, and we were told that these are the laws and the rules are like this" (Interview Adam, #00:16:12#).

Additionally, Ibrahim addressed self-censorship as a crucial hindrance that results from life in a dictatorship. Even if freedom of expression is allowed and citizens are given the opportunity to participate, it is a habitual attitude of, for instance, immigrants from Syria, not to interfere in the politics of the country in which they live and not to speak about the politics of the country:

Because in Syria we are always far from politics. I don't need that and a lot of people also not, because I can't speak about politics badly without punishment or so. But maybe in Germany is different, and we know it after a year or two, yes, but it's difficult in Syria, yes (Interview Ibrahim, #00:24:12#).

According to the course objectives, the orientation courses' aim is to foster participants' ability to reflect on and act in their new society (see above). Accomplishing this objective would require, however, practicing reflection and action during the course itself. This practice would require the instructor to have professional pedagogical skills in the areas of moderation, conflict resolution, and mediation, as well as didactically appropriate teaching-learning arrangements, which are often not given, as can be seen in the responses of the instructors. Content-oriented (rather than dialogue-oriented) learning has its consequences, as illustrated by Hassan:

Yes, I have not learned anything in this course at all, but I only passed the exam with luck and chance. I have only read the questions, but I have not learned anything, yes, because I am not interested in politics. I didn't learn it in my home country and I don't want to learn politics about this country either (Interview Hassan, #00:01:50#).

When asked what he can remember from the orientation course, Hassan answered: "I don't remember anything. Nothing at all" (ibid., #00:02:39#). Here, we see that the orientation course focused on content that did not seem relevant for the learner can hardly lead to a sustainable orientation in the new society.

In some cases, learning was perceived as an unnecessary burden: "About this political course, I don't think you ever need it" (Interview Hassan, #00:01:50#), which undermines learning motivation, as well as a general interest in the content of orientation courses.

All in all, a complex picture of the notion of acknowledging the other emerges from the findings: Education, which is purported to be an aid to integration into a (new) society, is inevitably torn between the principle of recognizing a person as an individual being in his/her uniqueness and the entirety of his/her life-world contexts, and the goal of ensuring the acquisition of required knowledge for a certain society and respecting

the constitutions and principles of the (new) society (and helping to shape them if necessary). The tension, indicated by instructors as well as by participants, can be described as a tension between acceptance of the German culture and preservation of the home country's culture, but also a tension between the idea of shared principle of humanity (universalism) and a right to be different and unique.

### Discussion and Conclusions: "But can you lead someone to a world?"

Organized learning possibilities play an important role in facilitating the transition of newcomers to a society. Integration courses are crucial for obtaining not only the language competences, but also to gain an overview of the fundamental principles and pillars of the new society. We suggest that Buber's philosophy of education has great potential for conceptualizing and analyzing adult education offerings for migrants. Buber's dialogical education provides an orientation for ever-changing life circumstances and ever-developing heterogeneous societies. We might benefit from Buber's approach also in dealing with such issues as fostering mutual understanding and respect, enhancing social participation and social cohesion, and helping people grow.

"But can you lead someone to a world?" (Buber, 2005b/[1935], p. 281) asked Martin Buber. His answer lies in dialogical education, in the (mutual) development - in the real "co-experience of people of the same nature, fused in the same kind, but still different minds" (ibid., p. 283). Education means "approaching something" (ibid., p. 279), but a person also "starts from something" (ibid., p. 280). It encompasses the versatility of the world in which people have already amassed experiences, but also the continuing quest for truth. One cannot convey a worldview, cannot lead to the truth, because "there is the existential responsibility of the person for having a worldview; a group cannot take it from a person, it mustn't" (Buber, 1993/[1965], p. 61). Buber's dialogical principle assumes the process of joint search for truth through encounter and communication with the aspiration of developing a deep understanding of the world, elaboration of a worldview, and overcoming the stage of fictionalism (appearance instead of being) (cf. Buber, 2005b/[1935], p. 285).

Dialogue as a special form of communication was considered by Buber to be essential for helping people grow and develop. Learning communication skills is also an explicit requirement formulated by BAMF in the curriculum of the orientation courses. The results of our study show, however, that dialogue rarely takes place in the orientation courses for migrants – due to numerous reasons such as time restrictions, density of the content to be learned, insufficient language competencies, didactical insecurities, and conflict avoidance. Orientation courses are per definition goal-oriented: they are designed to *transmit* to new-comers the knowledge and principles needed to live in a new society. However, the curriculum of the orientation courses also emphasizes an orientation on participants. This orientation is a didactical principle intended to integrate learners' needs, experiences, and patterns of meaning into the educational process. The results of the study show that orientation on participants remains in most cases a wishful, but unrealized component. The interviewed learners indicated that even if they felt free to express their opinions, there was in practice relatively little discussion. Disagreement was discouraged in order not to delay pursuit of the prescribed curriculum, and according to their responses, a deep reflection on democratic values, which is important for the further development of society, has been lacking.

If learning is limited to transmitting and memorizing information, then it is anti-dialogical; this learning would be what Buber called *Auferlegung* (imposition). Learning in terms of “opening up” (*Erschließung*) would more strongly promote the exchange and reflection about different life-experiences, meaning patterns and worldviews. We have found only little evidence in our interviews of this approach being used.

Some examples from the interviews, such as personal letters from an instructor to participants, illustrate the possibility of true encounter even under the very structured and formalized conditions of orientation courses. The few instances when participants reported discussions in class, they talked about how they were moments of gaining increased understanding of each other, where students felt respected for their unique life histories; as Buber might say, these were instances when the Other became Thou.

The capability to engage in dialogue is of special importance in a heterogeneous society in which difference and dissent play an integral part. Buber argues that acknowledging the otherness of the Other is the crucial point of each dialogue. Dialogue means being willing and able to open oneself to the other, to expose oneself to the other, make oneself vulnerable, be authentic, be able to articulate oneself. Some instructors mentioned in the questionnaire their wish for open conversations in class, yet pointed out that they do not possess the necessary competences to guide a dialogue across such differences as exist among groups of migrants from disparate backgrounds, and especially with the potential conflict situations that often arise from such differences. Such potential conflicts are reduced when I-Thou relationships are in place.

The educator can only educate if he or she is able to build a relation based on true mutuality, on true dialogue with students, and this mutuality, this dialogue can only come to the fore if the student trusts the educator, if the student feels accepted, otherwise any attempt to educate will lead to rebellion and lack of interest (Guilherme & Morgan 2009, p. 568).

Finding orientation in a migration society includes learning to acknowledge the plurality of different societal groups (in the case of this study, orientation course participants as representatives of newcomers, and teachers as representatives of the host society). This process implies the ability to express one’s own individuality and the resulting difference/otherness, and still to be open for a dialogue across those differences. Buber, working with migrants who came to the established State of Israel, laid emphasis on creating a true community [*die wahre Gemeinde*] where people develop an authentic reciprocal (I-Thou) relationship, one without instrumental purpose but rather with the aspiration to step into a dialogue (Guilherme & Morgan, 2017, p. 21). Without a dialogical approach of instructors, education can be trapped in the instrumental logic of the I-It-Relationship, where learners come to know facts and acquire a range of skills, but a true community never forms. This study illustrates the need for further training for instructors – in terms of didactical approaches and communication strategies.

The requirements that adult educators face are numerous. Based on the findings of this study, we can observe a discrepancy between the attitudes and aspirations of the instructors and the educational practice in which they work. They articulate a desire to accept and include the individuality of the participants, but at the same time they are confronted with the regulations by the BAMF, which make it hardly possible for participants and instructors to meet on an equal basis, or at least limit them through time restrictions and examination modalities. The instructors need to follow the detailed and rigid instructions of the BAMF and are subject to periodic review of their pedagogical practices to determine whether they comply with the given prescription. The guidelines for orientation are therefore pre-defined by the authors of the curriculum and must be

implemented by the instructors. The instructors, as shown in the findings, sometimes observe resistance among their students, a reluctance to follow the guidelines in the curriculum. A prescribed guideline, even perhaps the best one for a given situation, can hardly be imposed on someone. It might be difficult for adult educators when well-meaning, well-intended advice is not accepted. I-Thou-relationship might provide a useful concept to deal with this concern. Buber's dialogical concept argues against the practice of imposing values and beliefs; Buber calls for developing teachers' capacity for "real fantasy" (creative imagination anticipating a concrete whole person in the encounter) and for perceiving learners as subjects (acknowledging the creator's drive, *Urhebertrieb*, of each learner who strives to be active) (Buber, M., 2005e/[1926], p. 138). In this scenario, the teacher provides opportunities for learners to exercise this creator's drive through immersion into the new society and, just as important, by helping them see possibilities to be co-creators of it. The participants in this case would not only adapt themselves to the norms of their new society, into which the teacher tries to give them deeper insights, but they also actively analyze them, compare them with their previous experience, evaluate them, and in doing so, make the new society "their own" –a shared true dialogical community. For Buber, an acknowledgment of the plurality of life concepts means that "the educational efforts point to the real unity, which hides behind the ambiguity of the aspects" (Buber, 2005b/[1935], p. 281).

Our research allows us to make a tentative assumption, that, even when based on a well-intentioned attitude of the instructors, the integration course often leans toward the transmission of prescribed information and skills, development of missing competencies and knowledge (which are presumably required in the new society), and facilitation of the integration process. In other words, we are thinking about migrants as people who need help, who are receivers of our support. Such an attitude is, at best, empathetic, but it does not necessarily support the development of autonomy nor encourage dialogue on equal footing. Only in some cases, instructors treat migrants explicitly as equal contributors to society, as givers, co-workers and co-decision-makers. In order to fulfil this task, the emphasis must not be deficit-, but asset-oriented, where the individual lifepaths are brought into view, and differences are acknowledged and respected. The I-Thou-relationship stresses the holistic approach to a person as an equal. Through mutual recognition each person is acknowledged in his/her humaneness, rights, and strengths. The denial of the I-Thou-relationship, the denial of mutuality has ethical consequences (Guilherme, A. & Morgan 2009, p. 576). Dialogue is an essential element of educational offerings for migrants because it promotes a seeking for commonalities and the respecting of differences, encourages people to be part of a community, and, perhaps most important, treats each as fellow human beings.

Nevertheless, in addition to the criticism of the curriculum and the didactic design (that is rather far from dialogical education), the importance of acquiring knowledge about the processes, structures and rules of a new society should be acknowledged. The BAMF's intention to provide participants of the orientation courses with the knowledge needed for life in Germany seems appropriate. Orientation courses need to address both: the knowledge about the structures and principles of the new society, but also the experiences and the interpretation patterns from the lifeworld of the participants (Kloubert, 2019, p. 130). For sustainable empowerment to think and act in a democracy, however, a dialogical education that addresses a person in his/her entirety and differentness is essential. Buber understands that both the I-Thou and the I-It relations play a role in educational process. He acknowledges the need for the I-It relationship as a tool for understanding the world, but he repeatedly stresses the importance of a



dialogic encounter in the context of an I-Thou relationship: “Without IT a human being cannot live. But who lives alone with IT is not human” (Buber, 1979b/[1923], p. 38).

We recognize the difficulty in implementing such a demanding concept as dialogical education, not least as instructors themselves are trapped within structural limits of the orientation courses. The results of this empirical study demonstrate the challenge that not only instructors face, but also the responsible authorities. They have the task of developing a curriculum and pedagogical practice that deal with the living environments and narratives of migrants. The course content aims to develop freedom of expression and awareness for a plurality of perspectives, as well as the experience of autonomy, and on the other hand to define and justify the values of a democratic society. A dialogical education, which, according to Buber, is based on authenticity, awareness of the other(s), and the principle of not wanting to impose oneself, could be a useful lens to evaluate the adequacy of the educational program aiming at providing orientation for (any) adults in a pluralistic migration society.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A representation of Buber's thinking about dialogical education can only be presented here in a very concise form. For a further description of Buber's work, see e.g. Faber (1960), Friedenthal-Haase (1991), Schilpp and Friedman (1963), or newer research by Guilherme and Morgan (2014, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> All the quotes have been translated by us into English. The names of the participants have been anonymized.

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